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RINGS OF REJECTION AND RECOGNITION IN ANCIENT INDIA

In classical Sanskrit literature, a piece of circular jewelry – a ring or a necklace, sometimes a bracelet or anklet – plays a central role in three separate but related bodies of mythology, each of which deals with the theme of sexual rejection and recognition. The first cycle tells of a woman who is married but rejected by her husband before she is able to get pregnant; the second tells of a woman who is impregnated before a public marriage has taken place and is then denied by her husband; and the third tells of a woman who disguises herself as a non-wife and is identified as a legal wife by her necklace. The ring (or necklace) identifies the woman in the first case as a married woman who has been (legally) impregnated, in the second case as a pregnant woman who is legally married, and in the third as a desired woman who is the legally designated, though not yet married, wife. In all three cycles, circular jewelry resolves the paradox of marital sexual rejection: the husband desires both an erotic encounter and a legitimate child, but not from the same woman. Let us consider these cycles separately and then together, to see how the ring or necklace is not simply multivalent but bi-polar, ambivalent, signifying, like so many symbols, two opposite things at the same time (Doniger, 1998: 95–108).

1. THE RING OF THE CLEVER WIFE

In the cycle of myths known to folklorists as “The Clever Wife”, the husband challenges his wife to get his ring (and a child), and she succeeds. The story usually involves a riddle and always embodies a paradox. (The jewelry, though not the riddle, is already there in the tale of Tamar and Judah in the Hebrew Bible, *Genesis* 38). The folklorist Stith Thompson gives this motif the evocative title of AT 891*D (subtitled, “The Rejected Wife as Lover”); it is best known in Europe from Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

One of the earliest recorded variants of the theme is the tale of Muladeva and the Brahmin’s daughter, the last tale told in the *Ocean*

of the Rivers of Story (Kathasaritsagara), composed in Kashmir in the tenth century C. E.:

Muladeva and his Clever Wife

Muladeva met a clever girl who humiliated him by posing a riddle he couldn't answer. He resolved to pay her back by marrying her. On the wedding night, he reminded her of the riddle and identified himself as the man she had tricked; then she recognized him. When he told her that he would abandon her and go far away, she, too, made a promise: "I swear that you will father a son who will bind you and bring you back to me." When they had made these mutual vows, she turned her face from him and went to sleep; he put his own ring on her finger while she slept and went back to his native city, Ujjain, in order to test her cleverness.

When the Brahmin's daughter awoke in the morning she did not see Muladeva but she found the ring, with his name on it, and she realized, "He has kept his promise and abandoned me. Well, I will keep my promise, too, and abandon all regrets. His name, on this ring, is Muladeva, a famous trickster. Everyone says he lives in Ujjain. That's where I'll go." She went to Ujjain, dressed as a courtesan named Sumangala, set up an establishment, and became famous there. Muladeva came there and did not recognize her, because she was wearing the clothes of a courtesan, but she recognized him. He stayed with her until she became pregnant, whereupon she forged a summons from the king and left Muladeva to return to Pataliputra.

She gave birth to a son, and when he was twelve years old and asked about his father she told him the story. The boy said, "Mommy, I will bind him and bring him back, and so I will fulfil your promise." He went to Ujjain and recognized his father from the description his mother had given him. He challenged his father to a riddle contest, which the boy won. The boy bound his father and took him back to his mother in Ujjain. When his mother saw him she said, "My husband, today my promise has been fulfilled. A son fathered by you has bound you and brought you back to me." And then she told the whole story, in front of everyone. (*Kathasaritasagara* 124 [18.5] 131–237.)

We never learn Muladeva's wife's name at all, or her father's or her son's; she is just "the Brahmin's daughter" – though, significantly, she gives herself a name when she becomes a courtesan; does this mean that her masquerading identity as a courtesan is her only true independent identity? Muladeva, of course, has a name, indeed a notorious name, which is all that she gets from the ring in this text.

But the ring plays a far more important role in other Indian variants: before the wife in disguise will sleep with her husband, she demands that he give her his pearl necklace, diamond necklace, and ring (Natesa Sastri, 1886: 246), or his ring and handkerchief (Knowles, 1892: 104), or his diamond necklace, signet ring, and breast-ornament (Zvelebil, 1987: 153–164), and she produces them, along with the grown child, years later. In a Moroccan variant, he gives his disguised wife first his ring, then an anklet, and finally a necklace; years later, when he is about to marry another woman, the first wife produces three children, each carrying one of the three pieces of jewelry, and each named after the town in which she seduced her husband, the names being regarded

as part of the proof, too (Hasan-Rokem, 1982: 78–79). Thus, where the ring in the tale of Muladeva merely reveals to the mother the identity, more precisely the *name*, of the *father*, in other Indian tellings it reveals to the father, and to the whole world, the *identity of the mother*. In many variants (including the Shakespearean), the ring of Tamar is combined with the child of Muladeva's wife to produce the double condition: ring plus child. But the two forms of evidence are not equal: the ring is an afterthought (albeit a very significant afterthought), while the child is the basis of the initial wager.

We might ask, Who is asking the riddle? Who is testing whom in these stories? In the Muladeva story, the wife sets the task herself and not only satisfies her own conditions but outriddles her husband and makes a fool of him. In another variant, too, when he vows, "As a punishment for your impertinence – cracking riddles with me! – I shall marry you! But right from that moment I'll throw you into solitary confinement!", she replies, "If indeed you will marry me, then I shall bear you a son without you even knowing it, and I shall make him flog you with a whip!" (Zvelebil, 1987: 153–164). Or, when he vows, "Someday I will marry you and punish you greatly", she replies, "When I have borne you a son, I will tie you to your horse's leg and have you beaten" (Parker, 1910: 75–79), or she vows that she will bear him a son who will tie him in a sack and beat him (Natesa Sastri, 1886: 246). In the Muladeva story, she is the one who turns her back in bed first (though he has *told* her that he will abandon her), and in another variant, too, it is she, rather than he, who gets up up and sleeps in a separate bed when she realizes that he has tricked her by spying on her when disguised as her cook (Knowles, 1892: 292–293).

But sometimes the man sets the task for his wife; in one Indian variant in which there is no initial antipathy between them, and hence no reason for revenge, as the husband goes away on a business trip he casually remarks, "When I return I expect to find you have built me a grand well; and also, as you are such a clever wife, to see a little son!" (Stokes, 1880: 216). (In a Moroccan variant, the well is already there, and he throws her into it [Hasan-Rokem, 1982: 78–79].) Even when he sets the terms, however, she may be the one who takes charge. In one Turkish variant, the wife's agency is extreme and complete: her husband leaves her with an empty chest sealed with his seal, which he commands her to fill with gold and silver *without opening the seal*; a mare, from which he wishes to have a foal like his black horse (on which he rides away); and, as usual, he asks her to bear a child, but here also to teach the child well and send the child to him, mounted

upon the horse. The seal may actually be on a ring or else may simply play the role usually played by the ring: to identify the person who slept with the woman. She accomplishes the first two tasks by dressing as a prince and winning from him, at gambling, his horse and seal, using the seal to open and reseal the chest and the horse to cover the mare, before returning them to him. She accomplishes the third task by having the “prince” send her husband a beautiful female slave (herself, of course), whom he impregnates (Radloff, 1886: 191–198). The sealed chest is a metaphor for her womb, and for the surface of a woman that the true lover must penetrate. This is precisely what her husband cannot do: he fails to recognize his wife either when she is de-sexualized (as a prince) or hyper-sexualized (as a slave girl).

Certainly the man poses the problem, whoever actually sets the terms of the test: a child produced without a sexual act, fertility achieved without eroticism. And the man *is* the problem in the complementary cycle to which we will now turn, the tale of the forgetful husband, epitomized by Sakuntala.

2. THE RING OF SAKUNTALA

For the clever wife, the ring is both the problem (when she is told to get it) and the solution (when she uses it to prove who impregnated her). For Sakuntala, as for the clever wife, the ring is both the problem (when she loses it) and the solution (when she finds it again); but her husband, king Dusyanta, is her more important problem (he denies her), and for him the ring is the solution (the excuse). The ancient story of Sakuntala and the lost ring of memory is told in a famous Sanskrit play by the poet Kalidasa, but it is based upon a story in the *Mahabharata* (the great Sanskrit epic, composed between about 400 B.C.E. and 400 C.E.) in which there is no ring:

The Rejection of Sakuntala

When King Duhsanta was hunting in the forest, killing all the animals, he came to a hermitage where he met Sakuntala and persuaded her to marry him by the *gandharva* rite of private, mutual desire; but she made him promise that the son she bore to him would become king. Then he left, promising to send for her. Sakuntala gave birth to a boy and brought him to court, saying to Duhsanta, “This is your son.” When the king heard her words, he remembered perfectly well, but he said, “I do not remember. Whose woman are you? I don’t remember ever having had anything to do with you. I do not recognize this son that you have. Women are liars. Who will trust what you say? Your son is too big, and too strong, to have been born as recently as you claim.”

She left in fury, and a disembodied voice from the sky said, “The mother is the father’s leather water-bag; the son belongs to the man who begets him. The mother

brings forth a son and her own body is split into two. Support your son, and do not reject Sakuntala." Then Duhsanta said to his courtiers, "I knew all of this perfectly well, knew that he was my own son. But if I had accepted him as my own son just from her words, there would have been doubt among the people." Then he accepted his son and forgave Sakuntala for the harsh words she had spoken to him in her anger. (*Mahabharata* 1.64–69)

Duhsanta's sexual viciousness is foreshadowed by his excessive hunting and hardly mitigated by his statement that he rejected Sakuntala because of his fear of public disapproval, an argument that rings equally hollow when Rama uses it to reject Sita (*Ramayana* 6.103–6). Either he does not remember her or, much more likely, he does not want to remember either her or his awkward promise about the succession. But a divine voice forces him to acknowledge his son, whose extraordinary size and strength had previously led the king not to accept him as divinely blessed but to reject him as begotten by some other, previous lover. That voice's statement about the importance of mothers is hardly feminist – it is of the "hen as a way for an egg to make another egg" school of embryology. But its surprisingly violent image of a woman in childbirth – split in two – evokes sympathy for mothers and suggests the classic, violent response of a woman to a double-dealing man: become two women, as Muladeva's wife did. Surely we must hear an ironic voice, perhaps even a woman's voice, in the text's statement that the king magnanimously forgave *her* for speaking to him in anger.

Stanley Insler likens Duhsanta to Yavakri, the demonic rapist (*Jaiminiya Brahmana* 2.269–70; O'Flaherty, 1985: 105–107): he compares the "forced rape" that Yavakri commits and his destruction by a "fake wife" with what he regards as the virtual rape of Sakuntala at the hands of the "false" Duhsanta. Insler calls it a rape because Sakuntala was "completely innocent until the arrival of the king and therefore highly susceptible to the king's advances.... The Gandharvan [marriage is] motivated by desire and lust, and the tale thus continues the old theme of rape with a new twist" (Insler, 1989: 120 and 125). But we need not single out the particular story of Yavakri to find a counterpart to the tale of Sakuntala; hundreds of other stories in Indian literature, and beyond, share these features of rape and masquerade as well as many other details that make them even closer parallels (Doniger, 1994, 1996, 1998).

When the early Buddhists told the story of Sakuntala, in texts composed perhaps as early as the fourth century B.C.E., they used different names and introduced the theme of a ring, not a ring of memory but a ring that served both as a proof of identity and as a kind of child support:

The Ring of the Bodhisattva

[King Brahmadatta of Benares was wandering in his pleasure groves when he saw a woman and fell in love with her. He seduced her and she conceived.] He gave her the signet ring from his finger and dismissed her with these words: "If it be a girl, spend this ring on her nurture; but if it be a boy, bring ring and child to me." [She gave birth to a boy, and the children teased him, calling him "No-father." He asked his mother about his father, and she told him. At his wish, she took him to the palace and said], "This is your son, sire." The king knew well enough that this was the truth, but shame before all his court made him reply, "He is no son of mine." "But here is your signet-ring, sire; you will recognise that." "Nor is this my signet ring." Then said the woman, "Sire, I have now no witness to prove my words, except to appeal to truth. Wherefore, if you be the father of my child, I pray that he may stay in mid-air; but if not, may he fall to earth and be killed." So saying, she seized the Bodhisattva by the foot and threw him up in the air. [The child, suspended in the air, told the king he was his son. The king received him in his arms and made him heir to the throne.] (*Katthaharijataka*)

This text is one of very very few, among thousands of retellings of this tale, that mentions the commonsense fact that a ring doesn't actually prove anything at all unless other people recognize it. (In fact, another Buddhist retelling, the *Uddalakajataka*, reverts to the more conventional assumption that the ring is an absolute proof: when the seducer, this time the king's Brahmin chaplain, says to the child, "I gave your mother a token, where is it?" the boy hands him the ring, which the Brahmin recognizes and acknowledges.) It also perpetuates the gender bias in the hard-headed value of a ring: if the child is a boy, it's all well and good to use the ring to secure his patrimony, but if it's a girl, you might as well use it for her dowry (a very early instance of the argument that diamonds are a girl's best friend). These rational moments lead, however, back into irrational religion, an act of truth reminiscent of Sita's fire ordeal in response to Rama's rejection and of the voice from the sky in the *Mahabharata* tale of Sakuntala: a miracle, a suspension of the law of gravity, which proves the identity of the child and epitomizes, like the judgement of Solomon (1 *Kings* 3.16–27), the liminality of the child torn between two parents. But where Solomon's proposed solution to split the child, which would kill it, smoked out the true mother in protest, the king here quite blithely accepts the possibility that his son may crash and die.

The Buddhist text spells out, as the *Mahabharata* does not, the king's embarrassment and his total disregard for the child as well as the mother. The poet Kalidasa, writing in the fourth century C. E., had his work cut out for him to transform the king (whom he calls Dusyanta) from a lying rapist to a sympathetic lover, and he fell back upon the tried and true device of the magic ring and the curse of forgetfulness:

The Recognition of Sakuntala

King Dusyanta met Sakuntala in the forest, and they fell in love. She did not yet know that he was the king (he told her he was the king's minister in charge of religious affairs); then he offered her his signet ring with his name engraved on it, and when her friends read the name on the ring and acted surprised, he said, "Do not misunderstand; the ring is a gift from the king." Sakuntala refused the ring at first, but eventually, after she had found out that he himself was the king, she slept with him (by the *gandharva* rite of mutual desire). He placed his ring on her finger as he left to return to court, telling her to count off one day for each letter of his name, and at the end he would send for her.

Sakuntala, lost in thoughts of the king, ignored the hot-tempered sage Durvasas, who cursed her: "Since you were so lost in thought of someone so that you had no mind for anyone else, he will not remember you even when you try to awaken him, just as a drunk does not remember the story that he told before." Sakuntala didn't hear the curse, but her friends did, and persuaded the sage to limit it: "The power of the curse will cease the moment she presents some ornament as a token of recognition." When the king failed to send for her, and Sakuntala discovered that she was pregnant, she set out for court, and her friends advised her, "If the king is slow to recognize you, be sure to show him the ring inscribed with his name."

Meanwhile, at court, the king's neglected chief queen was singing a sad song: "How have you forgotten your love?" When the king saw Sakuntala, who was veiled, he wondered who she was; when he was told that she was bearing his child, he was full of doubt; and when she removed her veil, he said, "Did I take this beauty before, or not? No matter how hard I try, I cannot remember ever making this woman my own. And how can I accept her when she shows clear signs of pregnancy and I have doubts about being the one who sowed the field, as it were?" Sakuntala thought to herself, "When his passion has undergone such a change, what good would it do even if I were to make him remember? But I must prove my own purity." And she said to the king, "If you have doubts, thinking that I am another man's wife, I will dispel your doubt by this token of remembrance. . . . O god, my finger is not wearing the ring!" Her chaperone said, "It must have been lost when you went into the water at the shrine." The king smiled and said, "This is why people say that women are so cunning." But he continued to waver: "Am I deluded, or is she lying? This is my quandary. Which is worse for me, to be a wife-abandoner or a man defiled by the touch of another man's wife?"

The chaplain made a helpful suggestion: "Since it has been predicted that the king's son will be a sovereign of the world, wait until Sakuntala has the child and see if he has the marks of sovereignty." The king agreed, but Sakuntala ran away and was snatched up to heaven by the celestial courtesan who was her mother. The king lamented, "Though I do not remember the sage's daughter, or any marriage, still my aching heart contradicts me."

A fisherman found the king's ring in a fish and brought it to the palace. As soon as the king saw the ring, he remembered that he had married Sakuntala and had denied her in the delusion that overcame him when she had lost the ring. But, one of the women argued, "Such a passion should not need a token of remembrance or recognition." To which the king replied, "So, let me blame the ring."

One day, in heaven on the business of the gods, Dusyanta met the child that Sakuntala had borne. When a bystander remarked, "Miraculous, astonishing, the speaking resemblance between this boy and you," the king began to suspect that it was his own son. The boy had lost his bracelet while playing with a lion cub, and the king picked up the bracelet, to the astonishment of the bystanders, who recalled that it was a magic bracelet that no one but the boy or his parents could pick up; if anyone else touched it, it would change into a serpent and bite them. The sceptical

king asked, "Have you yourself ever been eye witnesses to this transformation, with your own eyes?" To which the two women replied, "Many times." But the king was convinced only when the boy said, "You are not my father; Dusyanta is my father." Then Sakuntala entered and said, "Even after I heard that the bracelet didn't turn into a serpent, I was afraid to believe it." But when she saw the king she said, "He is not like my husband. Who is he, who defiles by the touch of his limbs my son, who was protected by that bracelet?" The boy said, "Mommy! This stranger embraces me and calls me his son." Then Sakuntala and the king began to argue:

King: "My dear, it is only fair that you should turn my cruelty to you against me, as I see that you now refuse to recognize me. The darkness of my delusion has been pierced by the light of memory. . . ."

Sakuntala: "It must have been the ripening of my past deeds that made you, who had been so compassionate, become so cold. But how did you come to remember unhappy me? Ah, I see your ring."

King: "Yes, it was by getting back this ring that I got back my memory. It does seem to me strange that, through a loosening of my memory, I denied Sakuntala and then, afterwards, as a result of seeing the ring, I understood that I had formerly married her."

Sakuntala: "Thank goodness! My husband did not refuse me without any reason. But I don't remember being cursed. Could I have been cursed without knowing it, when my mind was distracted by the separation? Is that why my friends advised me to show the ring to my husband?"

Then a god explained it to her: "Your husband rejected you because of the curse that obstructed his memory; the reflection [*chaya*] does not assume a shape on the surface of a mirror when its brightness is masked by dirt, but it easily finds its place there when it is cleaned."

The twist here consists in the fact that although the king gave Sakuntala the ring to make her remember *him*, its loss makes him forget *her*; the magic of the loss of the ring on her finger is projected, as it were, into his mind many miles away, like the ointment that, according to ancient Indian theory, you put on your eyes to keep other people from seeing you. (*Kamasutra* 5.6.24–5) The shadow and clouded mirror reflection symbolize the loss of the image, of the memory.

The king lies about the ring at the start (denying that it is his, just as he will later deny that Sakuntala and her son are his), and then he forgets it; the curse is a very convenient and rather suspicious excuse, as the cynical ladies in the court point out: "Such a passion should not need a token of remembrance or recognition". The king's reply, "So, let me blame the ring", is about as close to an admission of guilt as that sort of ruler, indeed that sort of man, will ever get. The king has done this before, as we know from the neglected queen who sings of forgotten love. Sakuntala, who has begun to understand him better, offers him an easy out: "It must have been the ripening of my past deeds that made you, so compassionate, became so cold". She is also persuaded that "when his passion has undergone such a change", it would be no use to try to remind him of it. Yet she pretends not to

recognize him at first, subjecting him to his own treatment, a very mild version of the trickster tricked.

Dusyanta's loss of memory is notorious in later Sanskrit literature: when a woman named Kalingasena is seduced by a man disguised as a king, and the real king later denies having had her, she says to him, "Did you marry me by the *gandharva* ritual and then forget me, as Dusyanta forgot Sakuntala, long ago?" But the king replies (in that case honestly), "Truly, I never married you at all; I just came here now" (*Kathasaritsagara* 30–34). (In a delightful satire on the Sakuntala story by M. Miles, when she meets him again, "The king of course has forgotten all about it, being preoccupied by some land deals in which he and Queen Hallari have become entangled" (Miles, 1997).) The ring is doubled by the magic bracelet that identifies the boy's parents – an item that, in mass production, would put an end to all Family Romances. The king is sceptical about this trick – as is Sakuntala, who won't believe the evidence of the bracelet until she sees the king with her own eyes –, but eyewitnesses shut him up.

The woman must produce the hard evidence of *both* the ring *and* the son to win her husband back. Unlike Duhsanta in the *Mahabharata*, who with calculating commonsense rejects the son who is unnaturally big and strong for his alleged age, Dusyanta recognizes his son by that very same unnatural, supernatural behavior, his courage in fighting the lion (just as Zeus and Amphitryon recognize the infant Heracles by his courage in fighting a snake [Plautus, 1974]). But there are other signs of recognition as well. Bystanders note the "speaking resemblance", literally a "form that talks together", between the boy and his father. The hard evidence is undermined and the "soft" evidence of somatic memory is validated: when the king first falls in love with Sakuntala, who is apparently of another class (*not royal*), he hopes that she may in fact turn out to be of his own class, and he reasons: "Surely she is fit to be the wife of a man of royal birth, since the heart of a nobleman like me yearns for her; for the inner inclinations of good people are their authority to distinguish doubtful objects" (1.19). He responds instinctively in the same way to his son, even when his memory does not know that it is his son: "How is it that I feel love for this little boy as if he were the son born of my own loins? If my limbs thrill so to his touch, what bliss must he give to the man from whose body he grew?" (7.19). And his "aching heart" remembers his marriage to Sakuntala when his memory does not ("Though I do not remember the sage's daughter, or any marriage, still my aching heart contradicts me") (5.31). This tension between heart and memory, body and mind,

is correlated to the tension between illicit love and marital love in all of these stories, a tension that takes a different twist in the third cycle, to which we will now turn.

3. THE RING OF COINCIDENCE

The cynicism expressed in Kalidasa's play explicitly toward the evidence of the bracelet and implicitly toward the proof of the ring is ultimately undermined by the text: both the ring and the bracelet tell the truth. This cynicism is more forcibly expressed, though again contradicted, in another story about the conflict between the erotic woman and the married woman, King Harsa's *Ratnavali*, composed in the eighth century C. E. Harsa's play is part of a complex cycle of classical Sanskrit texts surrounding the mythical figures of King Udayana, his queen, Vasavadatta, and a series of co-wives. (We may read the *Sakuntala* story as another instance of this general theme, in which Sakuntala is the new co-wife who threatens the chief queen, a queen who grieves, much like Vasavadatta, over the waning of her husband's love.) In one episode in the *Ocean of the Rivers of Story* (*Kathasaritsagara* 15–16), Queen Vasavadatta magically disguises herself and serves the woman whom the king intends to make his co-wife (Padmavati), until the king sees through the disguise by means of the art of garland-making: only his queen could make that sort of garland. Harsha takes up the story *in media res*, assuming certain events that precede the play but are alluded to throughout:

There was a prediction that whoever married Ratnavali ("The [Lady with the] Jeweled Necklace"), the daughter of the king of Simhala, would become the greatest emperor in the world. The minister of Udayana, the king of Kausambi, proposed to Ratnavali's father that she be given to Udayana, though he was afraid of incurring the displeasure of the chief queen, Vasavadatta. Ratnavali's father agreed to give his daughter to Udayana, but while Ratnavali was sailing to Kausambi the ship was wrecked and Ratnavali was fished out by a merchant and given to the minister of Udayana, who recognized her by the jewel necklace which she always wore. He put her in Vasavadatta's service as a handmaid named Sagarika ("Oceanic").

This is where the play begins:

The Lady with the Necklace

Vasavadatta tried to keep the king from seeing Sagarika, who was very beautiful, but Sagarika saw him and fell in love with him; she also knew that she was supposed to marry him. The king then found a portrait that Sagarika had painted of him with her and declared his passionate love for the unknown maiden who had painted it. Sagarika and the king met, but when she ran away the king said, "My beloved, who is like a jeweled necklace, slipped out of my hand before I could get her around my neck."

Vasavadatta entered; the jester hid the portrait, as the king told him to do, but then he dropped it and the queen saw the portrait, recognized Sagarika, and asked the king who the other woman painted next to him was. The king smiled nervously and said, "Don't get the wrong impression, your majesty. Trust me (*alam anyatha sankhaya*). I painted this girl out of my own imagination (*svacetasaa*) and never saw her before (*adrstapurva*)."¹ The jester added, "I swear by my sacred thread, this is the truth, if we ever saw such a woman before." The queen's companion added, "Your majesty, this sort of coincidence does happen."

The queen left in anger, with a headache, and locked Sagarika up, saying that she had sent her to Ujjain. But as she left, Sagarika gave the jewel necklace to her friend to give to a Brahmin; the friend gave it to the jester, who realized that Sagarika must be of noble birth. Just then the chief councillor of the king of Simhala arrived, together with the man who had come from Udayana's court to escort Ratnavali on her original journey; both had survived the shipwreck but thought that Ratnavali had died. The councillor saw the necklace on the jester and thought he recognized it as Ratnavali's but then decided that this might be sheer coincidence. He told king Udayana, instead, that the king of Simhala had sent Ratnavali, who had been, however, shipwrecked and drowned. Vasavadatta exclaimed, "My beloved sister Ratnavali! Where are you? Hear me and reply!" Then Sagarika appeared, and the councillor from Simhala said to the escort, looking at Sagarika, "She looks just like the princess [*sadrsiyam rajaputryah*]."² And the escort said, "This very thought was in my mind." The councillor asked about Sagarika, and Vasavadatta replied to the king, "Your minister told me that she had been rescued from the sea; that's why she was called Sagarika." Then the councillor, recalling the necklace, decided that this must in fact be Ratnavali, and he said aloud, "Princess Ratnavali! How did you fall into such misfortune?"

Vasavadatta asked the escort, "Is this my sister Ratnavali?" and when he said, "It is," she embraced Ratnavali and said, "My sister!" The king said, "Is this the daughter of the king of Simhala, a man of high birth?" The jester said, "As soon as I saw the jewel necklace I knew that this was the property of no common person." Vasavadatta had Ratnavali's chains taken off and embraced her. The minister entered and told how he had set it all up, including putting Ratnavali/Sagarika in the harem so that the king would see her and fall in love with her. Vasavadatta smiled, adorned Ratnavali with her own ornaments, took her hand and joined it with the king's, and said, "My lord, accept this Ratnavali." Vasavadatta addressed Ratnavali as "Queen," and they all lived happily ever after.

In the *Ocean of the Rivers of Story*, the garland was the clue to the identity of the disguised Vasavadatta, a clue to Vasavadatta's skill, her personal accomplishment. There is no flower garland in Harsa's play, but the councillor refers to the jewel necklace as a jewel garland (*ratnamala*), and the jewel necklace plays the role of the garland as an identifying item of ornamentation, though in this case a sign of birth rather than talent.

The necklace suggests, if it does not prove, Ratnavali's identity. The king likens Sagarika to a jeweled necklace, not realizing that "jeweled necklace" is really her name, Ratnavali. This is not so much a coincidence as a kind of Freudian slip, suggesting that on some deep level the king may suspect that Sagarika is in fact Ratnavali. The necklace, like the ring, suggests this sort of buried recognition,

and, like the ring, is associated with a hidden name: the Oceanic girl at first is *like* a necklace, and is known to *have* a necklace (by which Udayana's minister recognizes her before the play begins, and her father's councillor half-recognizes her at the end), and finally is recognized as being *named* a necklace.

The necklace is at first taken as evidence, but is then more or less ruled inadmissible evidence. The argument about coincidence deflects the power of the jewelry clue so that it isn't the essential clue after all, but just evidence to corroborate the more profound recognition when it comes. The councillor at first invokes coincidence to explain away the striking resemblance between the necklace last seen on Ratnavali and now seen on the jester: princesses have so many jewels that "It is not hard to find a coincidence (literally, a conversation) of ornaments (*mahati rajakule ratnabahulyan na durllabho bhusananam samvadah*)", like the "speaking resemblance", literally a "form that talks together", that identified the true son of King Dusyanta. The question of coincidence has already been raised on another occasion, too: trying to explain the fact that the king claims to have painted a woman he has never seen, the queen's companion refers to it as a coincidence, *ghunaksara*, literally an alphabet letter eaten into a page by a bookworm, somewhat like our quantum metaphor of the odds against a monkey randomly typing out the works of Shakespeare. The jester tries to explain the portrait away with a pun, remarking that he and the king never "saw such a woman before"; he uses the term *adrstapurva*, which can mean either that such a woman was never seen before, that she is marvelous and unique, which is the truth, or that the king never saw Sagarika in real life, which is a lie. Other forms of jewelry and clothing, too, are used to perpetrate other sorts of disguises and machinations. Thus the king bribes Sagarika's friend with his own earring and rewards the jester with his own bracelet; the queen gives Sagarika's friend her own clothes and adorns Ratnavali with her own ornaments.

But the truth that the necklace reveals from the start is not Ratnavali's particular identity (which is finally established by her face, her resemblance to herself) but her class. Here again, like the *Jataka* text that used the magic ring to provide for the rearing of the child, the text suddenly plays a harsh rational light on a traditional romantic theme: *anyone* who has a fabulous necklace of emeralds and rubies must be a princess, if not necessarily the particular princess you are looking for. And Sagarika's class is eventually the key to her individual identity, just as it was a clue to Sakuntala's ("Surely she is fit to be the wife of a man of royal birth, since the heart of a nobleman like me yearns for

her; for the inner inclinations of good people are their authority toward doubtful objects").

Here is a new (or is it new?) plot use for the ring of recognition, further enhanced by the near-homonym, in Sanskrit, between the word for noble birth (*abhijana*, the quality that the king instinctively recognizes in Sakuntala) and recognition (*abhijnana*, the word used in the title of the play about Sakuntala). This pun plays a crucial role in Harsa's play, for it precipitates Vasavadatta's fury against Sagarika: on one occasion, the queen overhears Sagarika say to the king, "What is the use of this false, insincere lovemaking? For the queen is dearer to you than your very life; and so why do you commit this offense against her?" The king replies, "You're not telling the truth. When I prostrated myself at her feet it was because she was of naturally noble birth, but the affection that I feel for you has more passion because it comes from violent love". The queen steps forward and rejects the king's efforts to conciliate her by throwing himself at her feet; through clenched teeth she says, "Get up, get up, your majesty. Why should you suffer even now by serving a woman who is 'of naturally noble birth'?" Thus, although the necklace is not, as in the folk tradition, the single clue by which all stands or falls, it is still an essential piece in a more complex puzzle.

4. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE RING

What would the folklore of the world be like if there were no such thing as rings? What stories could we still tell? Surely not stories about the tension between sex and marriage. Stith Thompson notes several widely distributed motifs involving rings ("H 94: Recognition by ring", and "H 94.7: Recognition by ring springing off finger"), as well as an entire Tale Type: "TT 560: The Magic Ring". It is an old custom in America and Europe to tie a piece of string around a finger, or move a ring from one hand to another, to jog the wearer's memory about some trivial duty that might otherwise be forgotten. But the things that rings make people forget and remember in the stories we have considered are far from trivial.

Some rings, such as signet rings, are extensions of the hand, with its handwriting and, later, fingerprints; they have the personal emblem of the owner, the stamp of approval. In this way they are signifiers, semiotic objects with the ring of truth. Judah's "seal" is a signet, presumably a signet ring, which, together with the cord and staff, according to Robert Alter, "as the legal surrogate of the bearer would have been a kind of

ancient Near Eastern equivalent of all a person's major credit cards" (Alter, 1981: 9). Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, about a man hideously deformed by sin, concludes: "It was not till they had examined the ring that they recognized who it was".

In the tale of the clever wife, a ring often serves, together with the child, as proof that a sexual encounter has taken place. Sometimes, however, the paternity of the baby is denied, and the heroine has lost the ring. The woman has the baby but not the ring – the defining situation of every unwed mother. The husband forgets her and the children; she must remind him that he is the father of her children. Thus we may regard stories of the ring of forgetfulness as the shadow side of the tale of the clever wife, imagining how that scenario can miscarry. In both, the ring and the child sometimes function as minimal pairs, replacing one another in situations that argue for their functional identity. The magic ring, the symbol of forgetfulness and recovered memory, is often found, as in the tale of Sakuntala, in the belly of a fish (O'Flaherty, 1984: 222–223). The classic ring of returning memory is the ring of Polycrates, ruler of Samos, who threw his ring into the sea in order to avert the envy of the gods; the next day it was found by the cook in a fish being prepared for the royal dinner; Stith Thompson took this as paradigmatic of a motif, "Polycrates' ring, H 94.2". Hans Christian Andersen's "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" and the Hindu story of Mayavati (Doniger, 1984: 99–101) are other variants of the tale, in which not a ring but a child is retrieved in a fish, retrieved, as always, from forgetfulness.

In addition to the forgetfulness that results from losing the ring of memory, there are also rings explicitly designed to make people forget. Thus, though he wears what is supposed to be a ring of remembrance, Tristan forgets Isolde while he is wearing it; only when the ring is removed from his hand, from his body, does it enter his mind (Gottfried, 1960). In a twelfth century Irish story, a ring makes a jealous husband forget his wife's adultery: her lover "gives her a ring which will cause her husband to forget her shortcomings" (Cross, 1918: 415). In one set of texts, the husband who pretends to trick his wife is also cursed to forget her; and so while she unknowingly (because of the trick) commits adultery with her own husband, he unknowingly (because of the curse) commits adultery with his own wife. The first part of the story, inverted in gender to become a story about a masquerading wife, is depicted in the story of Muladeva, and the second part, about the forgetful husband, in Sakuntala. Both halves come into play in a corpus of related medieval European cycles, the Welsh story of Owain, the

Celtic story of Yvain, the story of Tristan and Isolde, and the Norse and German story of the forgetful Siegfried and his magic ring, best known in Europe from Richard Wagner's cycle of operas aptly named, "The Ring of the Nibelung".

This two-way power of rings, which serve as much to make people forget the truth about someone's identity as to prove true identity, may explain why they are so often doubled: sometimes a single ring plays a double function, simply by being first present then absent, first lost then found, but sometimes, as in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and the *Arabian Nights* tale, "The Story of Qamar al-Zaman and his Two Sons", a second ring unmasks the masquerade of illusion and forgetfulness even as the ring of illusion lays it on. Thus the ring is often made to take the blame: its loss, or, on the other hand, its evil power, clouds the memory of the husband.

Invisibility, marriage, forgetfulness, memory – how can the ring come to symbolize them all? Indeed, it symbolizes, and does, much more. Robert Benchley, in his "Opera Synopses", satirized the multi-valence of the Wagnerian ring; Benchley's heroine seeks "the magic zither which confers upon its owner the power to go to sleep while apparently carrying on a conversation; . . . [and a] *Tarnhelm* or invisible cap which will enable her to talk to people without their understanding a word she says. For a dollar and a half extra Dampfboot throws in a magic ring which renders its wearer insensible" (Benchley, 1962: 68). The many powers of the ring here include, as usual, unconsciousness.

The signet ring (the semiotic ring) is a sign of identity and memory, particularly the memory of love; it is, as A. K. Ramanujan remarks, "truly a 'memento'" (Ramanujan, 1983: 271). But when it is lost, it may make the wearer forget both love and identity, both the wearer's identity and the beloved's. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy sees the role of the ring in the many stories in which the hero loses a ring and forgets his bride until he gets it back again as "a *lethe* and an *anamnesis* that are not without relation to the Platonic and Indian doctrine of Recollection" (Coomaraswamy, 1945: 400).

Why is it a ring that plays this role? The ring carries a sense of identity; it may remind the wearer of the giver because it actually has something of him/her in it. The signet ring of identity is closely related to the ring of love, as Heinrich Zimmer has suggested: "A ring is a symbol of the personality, and to bestow a ring implies the surrender of one's being. To bestow one's ring is to bestow a power, the authority to speak in one's name" (Zimmer, 1948: 71). In Europe, a ring is a symbol of love or marriage; in Northeast Scotland it was thought that

there was a vein that went directly from the ring finger to the heart (Gregor, 1881: 26). But, as John Boswell cautions, “The role of rings in Christian heterosexual matrimony is hard to trace, partly because they were originally associated with betrothal . . . and partly because they were not regarded as important even in heterosexual marriage until the thirteenth century” (Boswell, 1994: 215). As a symbol of love, the ring may break in two, or the color of the stone may change, if the giver proves untrue.

Like the link of a chain, a ring may fetter the wearer to the giver, as Galit Hasan-Rokem notes of the rings in tales of the clever wife: “Like most jewelry, these objects stand symbolically, or are used concretely, for binding: watch, chain and ring; ring, foot-bracelet and chain; ring, girdle, crown. . . . The round form of the presents in this case also symbolizes perfection” (Hasan-Rokem, 1982: 92). The perverse culmination of the aspect of ring as fetter appears in *Story of O*, where O’s lover first “asked her to choose, from among the exactly identical rings which he showed to her in a small wooden box, the one which fit her left ring finger”. By the end of the book, two rings engraved with the names of O and of Sir Stephen are permanently affixed between her legs, sealing off her sexuality like a chastity belt, and attached to a chain by which any man can control her like an animal (Réage, 1965: 50 and 165). In Arthur Conan Doyle’s story about Lady Sannox, in which Lord Sannox has his wife’s lower lip cut off to punish, and prevent, her adulteries, he claims that her lip was cut by a poisoned dagger, but then he confesses, “The wound, by the way, was from nothing more dangerous than my signet ring” (Doyle, 1929). He has used his signature ring to brand her as his property, just as sadistically as the lover of O used his ring as a chastity belt.

The ring has obvious sexual meanings, perhaps on the analogy between putting a finger through a ring and putting one sexual organ into another. Eric Partridge says that, since Shakespeare’s time, “ring” has been “the slang term for the female genitalia” (Partridge, 1969: 175); it may also symbolize “physical consummation” (Bose, 1982: 343, n. 9). “The Ring of Fidelity”, one of the folktales collected by Freud and Oppenheim, seems to insist on the sexual meanings of the ring:

A man jealous of his wife had a dream in which a demon appeared. The demon promised him a foolproof way of ensuring his wife’s remaining faithful. “Take this ring,” instructed the demon, “and wear it on your finger with care. As long as you wear it, your wife cannot lie with any other man without your knowledge.” As the man awoke, excited with joy, he felt that he was pushing his finger into the vulva of his wife. (Dundes 1987: 51)

And in “The Enchanted Ring”, a Russian tale recorded by A. N. Afanasyev, a magic ring has the property of making a young man’s penis grow longer, the lower down on his finger he puts the ring. When a thief who is riding in a carriage slips the ring down to the middle of his finger, he gets an erection which “knocked the coachman off his box, passed over the horses and extended five miles in front of the carriage” (ibid.: 51). Certainly in these stories, at least, the ring has sexual associations.

These two sets of symbolism, of personal identity and recognition on the one hand and of sexual union on the other, unite to make the ring the pivot of myths about the identity of a sexual partner. More specifically, however, the ring plays a role in stories – told in ancient India, but also in Europe – about the tension between illicit eroticism, on the one hand, and legal marriage and progeny, on the other. Why this particular association of themes should have made use of the broader folk theme of the ring remains a mystery to me.

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